ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF THE MIDDLE EAST

c/o THE LODGE, SANDY, BEDFORDSHIRE, ENGLAND.

BULLETIN Nº 1 AUTUMN 1978

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The Establishment of the New Society

At the Annual General Meeting of the Ornithological Society of Turkey on 27th April 1978 a resolution was passed changing the name of the Society to "The Ornithological Society of the Middle East" (OSME). The geographical area of interest to the Society has been enlarged to include all countries of the Middle East as defined overleaf. This broadening of the Society's activities has been warmly welcomed by ornithologists from many different countries.

The Society will continue to accept and collate records from Turkey for future publication as necessary and welcomes material from other countries where no appropriate organisation exists for use in the preparation of check lists or data summaries.

The content of this Bulletin will give prospective members a good deal of information on the restructured Society. For further details you should write to the Hon Secretary, OSME, c/o The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL, England. To fulfil effectively its objectives of promoting the study of ornithology and the conservation of both birds and habitats in this important area the Society needs your support.

"The Sandgrouse" - A New Journal for a New Society

Changing the name and scope of the Society to cover the whole of the Middle East has entailed a rethinking of editorial policy. The enormously expanded area to be covered by "OSME" is not amenable to the kind of treatment Turkey received in the series of "Turkish Bird Reports" between 1966-1975. Whatever the merits and demerits of the comprehensive systematic lists in the Turkish Bird Reports, very few areas in the Middle East can boast a similar number of visiting or resident ornithologists and in consequence uniform coverage could not be achieved. Secondly, the editorial time and financial resources needed to publish even larger bird reports are simply not available, even if these were considered desirable. Instead of a new journal on the lines of the Turkish Bird Reports, the new society is therefore to have a scientific journal which will provide an outlet for papers and notes on any aspect of the ornithology of the Middle East.

The new journal, which will normally be issued annually, will be entitled "The Sandgrouse" and it is hoped to publish volume 1 in mid-1979. Monograph issues (eg checklists) may be published from time to time. Contributions on any ornithological topic (eg ecology, population dynamics, migration, behaviour, taxonomy, identification and conservation) are now required for the first volumes. These should normally refer to the "Middle East" as defined below, but work carried out elsewhere on species which occur in our area may be admissable. Council have decided to define "Middle East" loosely to include peripheral but related areas. It embraces Turkey and Libya in the west to Afghanistan and the Palearctic fringe of Pakistan in the east; the southern shores of the Black and Caspian Seas in the north to the Arabian peninsula and the Palearctic limits in the Sudan and Ethiopia in the south.

The editorial deadline for contributions for the first volume of "The Sandgrouse" is 31st December 1978. Contributions should be submitted to the editor - Mark Beaman, Culterty Field Station, Newburgh, Grampian AB4 OAA, Scotland, UK.

Birds of the Salang Pass, Central Afghanistan — S C Madge

Opportunities for getting fairly easily into the higher reaches of the Western Himalayas are few. One of the easiest ways of climbing up into the Hindu Kush mountains of central Afghanistan is by way of the main road (surfaced too!) from Kabul (the capital) to Mazar-i-Sharif in the north.

This spectacular route winds its way up through valleys on the south side of the mountains, leaving the heat of the lower altitudes and staggering to the Salang Pass (at 3,600 m) over and down, twisting into the valley of the Kunduz river and leading out onto the hot plains of Afghan Turkestan.

The Salang Pass itself is a superb location to base oneself for a few days exploration if one is equipped with food and tents as we were on the 1970 Oxford University Expedition when we spent two weeks in the area during July. Alternatively one can get dropped there by bus and spend a day wandering about before walking to a chaikana (tea-house) to spend the night - there is one some 8 km or so farther on down the valley on the north side.

The road itself runs through the Pass by way of a tunnel some $2\frac{1}{2}$ km long (one of the longest in the world) and even in July there were patches of snow about.

The scattered areas of green turf by the streams held a few small nomad encampments with colourful women (some unveiled!), dogs (unfortunately) and of course, goats. We found a rich and varied avifauna here and no doubt the area is superb for other forms of wildlife too: Long-tailed Marmots Marmota caudata and Himalayan Mouse-Hares Ochotona roylei were two mammals that were very much in evidence about the top of the Pass.

The boulder-strewn slopes and craggy ridges at the top of the Pass contained flocks of both Alpine Pyrrhocoraz graculus and Red-billed Choughs P. pyrrhocorax; Lammergeiers Gypaetus barbatus were also a familiar sight in the area and the impressive, pale, Himalayan Griffon Gyps himalayensis is here, at the westernmost known limit of its world range.

Scrambling about the boulder scree, massive white-winged Himalayan Snowcocks Tetraogallus himalyensis were often flushed, giving liquid, rather bee-eater-like alarm calls before gliding, trilling, down the mountain slopes against an impressive backdrop of sheer faces, snow patches and clear blue skies. One female that we came upon on a small plateau, ran off with tail cocked up over her back, closely followed by about a dozen small chicks which scattered and disappeared amongst the boulders.

Perhaps one of the most fascinating aspects of this part of the Himalayas is the presence of a few central Asian species whose range extends into the Hindu Kush from the Altai mountains by way of the Pamir range. Brandt's Rosy Finches Leucosticta brandti fed on seeds of low, cushion plants in small flocks and the related Hodgson's Mountain Finch L. nemoricola occurs here too, but is less numerous. We also found several pairs of the superb Guldenstadt's Redstart Phoenicurus erythrogaster, with males carrying food (previously only known as a passage migrant in the country). More "familiar" birds were here too, about the scree slopes and stream banks, Snowfinches Montifringilla nivalis, Twite Carduelis flavironstris and Red-fronted Serins Serinus pusillus - the latter having come up from the juniper slopes lower down the valley.

From more oriental origins were a few White-capped Redstarts Chaimarrornis leucocephalus jumping about boulders in the streams rather like our Dipper Cinclus cinclus which was also here alongside its Asian counterpart the Brown Dipper C. pallasii.

My personal favourite montane birds are accentors and these are well-represented. The Brown Prunella fulvescens was the most plentiful and Alpines P. collaris were also fairly common about the top of the Pass; its central Asian relative, the Altai Accentor P. himalayana was also about in the same habitat, but in smaller numbers. Watching these two similar species we found that Alpines had fully-fledged, independent juveniles whereas the Altais were feeding young just about at the fledging stage.

Black Redstarts Phoenicurus ochruros were widespread about the area and we found a few more old friends from back home: Grey Wagtails Motacilla cinerea and migrant Green Tringa ochropus and Common Sandpipers Actitis hypoleucos about the streams and at the very top of the Pass, as we were watching a Wall Creeper Tichodromia muraria, we found a Wren Troglodytes troglodytes carrying food - the only one we were to see in Afghanistan.

Undoubtedly our best find was a magnificant pair of Great Rosefinches Carpodacus rubicilla on 16th July 1970 - the Afghan subspecies diabolica being previously only known from the type specimens collected in 1937 some 150 km to the east of our site. We watched them for some time feeding near a party of Brandt's Rosy Finches and in 1972 R Byrne and C Westwood located a pair and an odd male in the same area on 29th July and another male higher up in the same area on the following day.

I've only mentioned a few of the species that we came upon in the few days that we spent at the top of the Pass; no mention has been made of the birds that we found in the juniper covered slopes lower down the valley on the north side, with the rich variety of passerines including some interesting warblers for "phylloscophiles": Western Crowned Phylloscopus occipitalis, Green P. nitidus, Plain Leaf P. neglectus, Slender-billed P.tytleri and Sulphur-bellied Warblers P.griseolus. Not to mention the Black Parus rufonuchalis and Azure Tits P. cyanus flavipectus, White-winged Grosbeaks Mycerobas carnipes, White-capped Buntings Emberiza Stewarti and Blue-headed Redstarts Phoenicurus caeruleocephalus that they share the junipers with. Even lower down the valley in the mulberry orchards one should look out for two more Turkestan specialities: the White-winged Woodpecker Dendrocopos leucopterus and Turkestan Great Tit Parus bokharensis. A few species from the Himalayas proper reach the western limits of their range in eastern Afghanistan: Rufous-tailed Muscicapa ruficauda and Paradise Flycatchers Terpsiphone paradisi, Streaked Laughing-thrush Garrulax lineatus, Blue Whistling Thrush Myiophoneus caeruleus, Little Forktail Enicurus scouleri and Plumbeous Redstarts Rhyacornis fuliginosus that flit about the boulder-strewn, trout-infested, fast-flowing streams and adjacent scrub.

Obviously a tremendous amount of work needs to be done on Afghan ornithology and the high montane avifauna is perhaps the most fascinating.

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

Namaqua Dove in the Middle East

Although common in much of the drier regions of Africa, south of the Sahara, the diminutive Namaqua or Long-tailed Dove Oena capensis, only occurs regularly in the Middle East and North African region in the south west of the Arabian Peninsula. Its previous distribution in Arabia was, according to Col R Meinertzhagen in "Birds of Arabia" (1954), "South-west Arabia from 150 miles (240 kms) north of Mecca to the Aden Protectorate and east to the Wadi Hadramaut. Resident in Arabia throughout its range but scarcely above 5,000 feet (1,400 mtrs) ...". Since publication of "Birds of Arabia" the Namaqua Dove has been recorded outside the above noted range, as a vagrant in Jordan, and occasionally in southern Morocco, but curiously nowhere else in North Africa. In addition there is a pre 1971 undocumented specimen in a school museum in Qatar which is said to have been collected in that country.

In March 1975 I found the Namaqua Dove 40 kms south of Riyadh in central Saudi Arabia and this is the first record I am able to trace for the area. During the next two years I saw the species, or had reports of it, at several other localities in east and central Saudi Arabia. Some of the new records could be attributable to an increase in the number of observers in the area in the recent past, however there does seem to be a regularity in the first occurrence of the species in areas where it has not been seen before. Of particular interest is a group of records (G K Brown pers comm.) from well watched localities near Abqaiq, 40 kms from the Gulf, in east Saudi Arabia. The first bird was seen in the Abqaiq area in April 1976. The next occurred slightly to the south, at Hofuf, in April 1977 and then there were a spate of records, of up to five birds being seen together, near Abqaiq from early July to late September 1977. Other new records from the Middle East in the last few years are from the Dhofar province of Oman, southern Israel, Sinai and an unconfirmed report from Kuwait.

The habitat preference of the Namaqua Dove in Arabia is dry acacia bush country, which is the typical African habitat, however it is also found in cultivated areas, gardens and date groves and it may well be that the recent large developments in irrigation and agriculture in central Arabia have made available to it suitable habitat that did not previously exist. To my knowledge feeding is restricted to the ground, especially open sandy places or where there is close cropped grass. It often associates with other species to feed, such as House Sparrow Passer domesticus, and larks Alaudidae. In the middle of the day they collect near water to drink or rest in bushes. The flight is fast and direct with quick wingbeats and the "jizz" is reminiscent of a Budgerigar, Melopsittacus undulatus. An illustration of the Namaqua Dove can be found in "The Birds of Britain and Europe with North Africa and the Middle East" by Heinzel (et al).

The status of this dove in central and eastern Arabia is still far from clear. No proof of breeding has yet been obtained although an immature was seen at Abqaiq in July and I have examined immatures in the hand in August at Riyadh. (It should be added as a caution that this dove is noted for its erratic movements at all times of the year .) What pattern do the occurrences noted above make? A range extension, a series of eruptions or a new seasonal movement?

I am collecting data on the occurrence and "expansion" of the Namaqua Dove throughout the Middle East and North Africa and I would be grateful to hear from anyone who has unpublished information of sightings of the species outside the area quoted from "Birds of Arabia" above. Records of its first appearance at a well watched locality will of course be most valuable but even isolated records from an unexpected area would be welcome.

Michael Jennings
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Bustard Working Group

Several years ago, when it became apparent that a number of people from various countries in Europe were working for the conservation of the Great Bustard Otis tarda, the International Council for Bird Preservation instigated the formation of a World Working Group on Bustards. Members of this group have principally been engaged on their own countries' problems and needs, but recently the opportunity has arisen to take the initiative in gathering data on bustard species in unrepresented or less studied countries. An expedition is being mounted to the eastern Canaries to investigate the status of the Houbara subspecies Chlamydotis undulata fuerteventurae endemic there; another is being projected to study the Great Indian Bustard Ardeotis nigriceps population and distribution in Rajasthan. Files are being assembled on every species, and information is urgently required for a number of them, not least Great and Little Bustards Tetrax Tetrax.

Both these species occur in Turkey, and both have been reported as declining in numbers and as endangered. An expedition is being considered to examine their current situation; however, any study of the status and distribution of Turkish bustards will be helped by the submission of every record, with full details, to the OSME, and anyone planning to visit Turkey (or other likely areas for these species) is strongly urged to give extra attention to the search for bustards, so that in due course a picture can be composed from which any conservation measures can gain their full effect. Great and Little Bustards are declining drastically throughout their ranges, not merely in Turkey, and assistance, however small, will therefore be of very considerable value.

The ICBP Bustard Group is also much concerned with the Houbara, and members of OSME are urged to submit all records of this species, its status in the Middle East being far from clear.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

Raptor Watching in NE Turkey in 1979-1980

Following the discovery of a huge migration of birds of prey, especially Honey Buzzards Pernis apivorus and Steppe Buzzards Buteo buteo vulpinus, in NE Turkey in 1976-1977, there will be a new series of counts in the autumns of 1979 and 1980 to attempt to discover the magnitude and geographic extent of the passage through the whole of NE Turkey rather than the coastal region alone (where nearly 400,000 raptors were recorded between mid-August and mid-October 1976, see Orn. Soc. Turkey Bull. 14:2-5 (1977)).

Volunteers are needed for a pilot survey of the inland valleys in 1979 (mid-September to early October) and to man a series of watch-points in 1980 between the coast and the upper Aras valley between mid-August and late October. As it is hoped to man at least four watch-points in 1980, large numbers of volunteers are required! No previous raptor counting experience is necessary - one soon learns, and participants are welcome if they can join the groups for any period of two weeks or more. Some financial help may be available for the 1980 group, but in any case living expenses are low in NE Turkey and the cheapest return fare from London (by air to Istanbul and coach through Turkey) is under £110. Anyone interested in going east in either year should contact: Mark Beaman, Culterty Field Station, Newburgh, Grampian AB4 OAA, Scotland UK.

Mark Beaman

OST Bulletins

With the change of name of the Society from OST to OSME this present issue starts a new series of Bulletins. The OST Bulletins (15 in all) contain an interesting and valuable series of articles and reports on birds and localities in Turkey which new members might like to acquire. A small number of sets of these Bulletins have been reproduced and can be supplied at a price of £4.00 sterling (£5.00 for overseas members (post free)). Orders with payment to me please at 40 Leatherhead Road, Ashtead, Surrey. First come first served.

Don Parr
Hon Secretary

MIDDLE EAST BIBLIOGRAPHY

A Bibliography of the Avifauna of the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant and Mesopotamia by Major W A C Giffiths

This booklet of just over 100 pages, published by the (British) Army Birdwatching Society is packed full of Middle East ornithological references and data. The main section contains 730 references (compilation was completed September 1974) which are arranged by author in alphabetical order and cross referenced to a comprehensive geographical index. Translations of non-English titles are given. In addition there is a list of bibliographies for nearby regions. A separate list of 180 references of generally related subjects, such as climate, ecology, mammals etc., is given and another additional list of 23 titles deals with the avifauna of Socotra. One very useful appendix lists over 200 type specimens (species and races) collected from the Arabian region giving their synonymy and again cross referenced, in a handy manner, to the main sections of the bibliography. This book is a joy to browse through but when used for its intended purpose it saves hours of work in simplifying the task of finding and checking references. The Army Birdwatching Society has very kindly offered a number of copies of this most desirable book to members of OSME at the original price of only £1.00 (plus 30p postage and packing). Orders and money should be sent to the Treasurer. (See instructions for making payments elsewhere in this bulletin .)

SOME NOTES FROM THE TREASURER.....

New Subscriptions

At a Council meeting on 6th July 1978, the finances of the Society were considered in depth. It was revealed that the present annual subscription of £2.00 would not be adequate to support all the objectives of the Society. Following discussion of a number of alternatives the Council decided that the annual subscription should be £3.50*. The increased subscription is to a large extent dictated by the extra cost of producing a journal, "The Sandgrouse", every year rather than a report approximately every other year. In return for the new subscription members will normally receive:-

a) An issue of "The Sandgrouse". (Probably about 200 pages each issue).

b) Two bulletins. In addition, occasional special editions of the Journal on specific subjects, eg national checklists may be produced.

* All publications will normally be posted to members from the United Kingdom by the most economic means, however members living outside Europe may, if they wish, pay an extra £1.50 each year (making a total of £5.00) and receive all publications by airmail.

How to Pay

Please make the Treasurer's task easier by following the guidelines below:

a) Members with a United Kingdom bank account
Please ask for a "Bankers Order Form", as this is by far the most convenient means of payment. (NB If you already have a Bankers Order in force at the old rate or for the Ornithological Society of Turkey, do nothing yet because I will be writing to you).

b) Members living outside the United Kingdom

Although payment can be made in most currencies, a cheque or postal order in pounds sterling is preferred. (These can be purchased in most banks or post offices which have international facilities.) If payment in a currency other than sterling is unavoidable please ensure that the currency or document forwarded is negotiable in the United Kingdom and add 5% to your conversion to cover bank charges incurred by the Society.

c) Some other important points

Please remember that all banknotes should be sent by Registered Mail. Cheques and postal orders etc., should be made out to "The Ornithological Society of the Middle East".

No acknowledgements will be made for money received, unless receipts are specifically requested and a self-addressed (stamped) envelope provided.

Subscriptions are due on 1st January 1979.

Michael Jennings

PS The address for all correspondence is:-

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Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Ian Willis for designing our sandgrouse logo and John Reaney for the picture of Houbara Bustard and Cream-coloured Courser.